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## **The Fortunes of Arthur:**

### **Malory to Milton**

Willy Maley and Adam Swann

David Matthews, in his contribution to this volume, identifies a tension between veneration of significant figures from the past and scepticism surrounding their authorship, their arguments, and in some cases their existence. Elsewhere, Paul Stevens has shown the extent to which Milton was in a similar predicament, wanting to find in England's history a subject worthy of epic, but torn between the rigorous revisionism of the likes of Camden and Selden and 'the patriotic [tradition] mediated through Spenser, Shakespeare, and Drayton' (Stevens 2012: 157). Between Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, completed by 1470, and published by Caxton – with carefully qualified scepticism about Arthur's existence – in 1485, and Milton's *History of Britain* (1670), we can follow the fortunes of Arthur as a figure contested and celebrated in equal measure. Malory depicted the French wars under the guise of Arthur's sixth-century campaign against Rome, and Book III of Milton's *History* uses the same interval between Roman departure and Saxon arrival to warn contemporaries of the dangers of backsliding. One approach to early modern Arthurianism suggests that somewhere between Malory and Milton, Arthur became an inconvenient myth, retaining poetic and propagandistic potential but scoffed at by serious scholars. The Reformation and the rise of antiquarianism engendered suspicion of medieval sources, and Arthur and Brutus were undone by the rise of Anglo-Saxon studies (Brinkley 1932). Yet Arthur, like Brutus, maintained momentum even as myth morphed from history to poetry. But before delving into the variegated history of later

representations of Arthur, we must first consider how the legendary king was used in Malory's time.

### **Why the Matter of Britain mattered**

It's been argued that Malory's *Morte Darthur* was, like Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, an historical allegory, addressing the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V. Inconsistencies in Malory's Arthur have been attributed to his allegorical depiction of successive English monarchs: "interpreting it in terms of the Lancastrian dynasty, the three rulers dominating the life of Malory, it is a strikingly accurate picture. In general features the personality and career of Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI correspond respectively to (1) the Arthur of the first three books, (2) the Arthur of book four extending through to the Grail section, and (3) the Arthur of the post-Grail period" (Aurner 1933: 367). According to Nellie Aurner, Edward III and Henry IV exploited Arthurian elements to bolster their claims to France (Aurner 1933: 369), and many English kings found arguments for independence and imperial ambition in the Arthurian legends (Keiser 1973).

Caxton's 1485 "Prologue" rehearses objections to the authenticity of "Kyng Arthur/somtyme kyng of thys noble royalme/thenne callyd brytaygne" (Caxton 1485: 3<sup>r</sup>) before marshalling evidence in support of his iconic status. David Summers maintains that "Malory's Arthur was still largely held to be an Arthur of history, however anachronistic, embellished, and romanticized his attendant tales might have become, while Spenser's Arthur is an icon of literary imagination and political ideology" (Summers 1997: 372), but the difference is difficult to discern. Both Arthurs are allegoric figures and ideologically loaded. Henry Tudor's return from France in 1485 was marked by an appeal to Arthur "by allusion and imagery,"

because “the Arthurian *roles* of ideal monarch and national deliverer [...] were useful to Henry Tudor, and those roles existed not in the Arthur of history or of Continental romance, but in the Arthur of British cultural myth” (Summers 1997: 373-4).

Malory’s late medieval account of the death of Arthur is also the moment of an early modern rebirth of Arthur: “Early Tudor propaganda – such as the pervasive use of the Red Dragon icon, the naming of Henry’s first son Arthur, and the Arthurian elements in the noted pageant ‘The Receyt of the Ladie Katherine’ (celebrating Arthur’s marriage to Katherine of Aragon in 1501) – shifted the crucial meaning of Arthur further away from his place in history and toward his function as an icon representing British national character and destiny” (Summers 1997: 377). Ideas of Englishness, and later Britishness, depended on far-fetched claims to former empire. The Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533) declared, “Where by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an empire, so hath been accepted in the world” (cited in MacLachlan 1990: 66). British myths were harnessed in the interest of English state expansion (MacColl 2006: 249).

Yet *Morte Darthur* is an odd choice of text to justify English imperial aggrandizement in France, because as Derek Pearsall observes, “a work in which the hero and principal character is a Frenchman, constantly wronged and misunderstood by the native British, does not seem designed to get the national pulse racing” (Pearsall 2001: 25; cited in Hodges 2010: 556). Malory’s notion of nationalism is far from Anglocentric, and while “[t]he Bretons were often blamed for the death of Arthur” in thirteenth-century invective, narrow national frameworks and indeed colonial perspectives on the period fail to do justice to its complexities (Butterfield 2009: ii). In recent readings of *Morte Darthur* a multicultural Malory emerges, critical of both narrow nationalism and overweening empire: “Instead of celebrating an

expansionist vision of England, he uses the complex interactions of the knights with one another and the king to explore the tensions between imagining an English nation and imagining a broader British one” (Hodges 2010: 557). Such tensions are evident in the way Malory’s Arthur spends the early part of his reign subduing Wales and Scotland, despite his “best knights com[ing] from regions outside England” (Hodges 2010: 556).

While modern Anglocentrism has obscured the more nuanced affiliations evident in Malory, *Morte Darthur* is not unique in this respect. A national identity crisis inheres in the Arthurian tradition, since “there is always the question of which people Arthur represents – the English; the British, understood as all the peoples of the island; or the Celtic British, especially the Welsh, to whom Arthur was a symbol of resistance to the very English who were claiming Arthur as their own” (Hodges 2010: 558).<sup>1</sup> Critics like Michelle Warren and David Wallace note the extent to which Arthurian literature is “border writing” and “a source of hybridization” (cited in Hodges 2010: 569, n. 4). Although co-opted by a centralizing Tudor state, its origins lie in a European and even global interplay of interests, a “vision of the nation [...] forged through regional influences” (Hodges 2010: 560). Dorsey Armstrong likewise sees regionalism and internal colonialism as key to Malory, arguing that “The relationships of the Cornish Tristram and the Saracen Palomides to Arthur’s court are in some sense similar to the relationships of settler colonists and indigenous colonized to the imperial force of which they are satellites and subjects” (Armstrong 2006: 181)

Whereas *Morte Darthur* diffused the power of Arthurian legend into the regions, Polydore Vergil’s *Anglica historica* (1534) sought to dismantle the myth altogether (Summers 1997: 380). But the Tudor state was eager to reunify and reaffirm the legend, and despite the doubters, the myth persisted. Thomas Wilson, in

*The Arte of Rhetorike* (1553), drew on the example of Arthur as a name to conjure with: “If there be any olde tale or straunge history wel and wittely applied to some man living, all men love to hear it of life. As if one wer called Arthur, some good fellow that were wel acquainted with kynge Arthures boke, and the knightes of his rounde table, would wante no matter to make good sport, and for a nede would dubbe him knight of the rounde table, or els prove hym to be one of his kinne, or els (whiche were muche) prove him to be Arthur hym selfe” (Wilson 1553: fol. 78<sup>v-r</sup>; Millican 1930: 173-4). Conversely, Roger Ascham, who clearly had a sense of humour bypass, singled out Malory in *The Scholemaster* (1570) as one of those “idle Monkes, or wanton Chanons” who debauched youth with tales of chivalry:

for example, *Morte Arthure*: the whole pleasure of which booke standeth in two special poyntes, in open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye: In which booke those be counted the noblest Knightes, that do kill most men without any quarell, and commit fowlest aduoulturies by sutlest shiftes: as Sir *Launcelote*, with the wife of king *Arthure* his master: Syr *Tristram* with the wife of king *Marke* his uncle: Syr *Lamerocke* with the wife of king *Lote*, that was his own aunte. This is good stuffe, for wise men to laughe at, or honest men to take pleasure at. Yet I know, when Gods Bible was banished the Court, and *Morte Arthur* received into the Princes chamber. (Ascham 1904: 231)

Arthur survived the barbs of puritans and pedants, and neither the Reformation, nor new historians keener on facts than fables, could dislodge him from the royal chamber or detract from his usefulness to poets and patriots.

## Sidney and Spenser

Philip Sidney for one was less averse to “open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye” than Ascham. In his *Apology for Poetry* (1595), Sidney declared: “Poetry is the companion of the camps. I dare undertake, Orlando Furioso, or honest King Arthur, will never displease a soldier” (Sidney 2002: 105). In fact, when it came to Arthur, most Renaissance humanists wore two hats. Spenser went to Cambridge in 1569, where he found himself in an institution that had decided to counter Oxford’s claims to have been founded by Alfred with its own Arthurian genealogy.<sup>2</sup> In the gloss to the April Eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), Spenser writes:

Ladyes of the lake) be Nymphes. For it was an olde opinion amongste the Auncient Heathen, that of every spring and fountaine was a goddesse the Soveraigne. Whiche opinion sticke in the myndes of men not manye years sithence, by meanes of certain fine fablers and lowd lyers, such as were the Authors of King Arthure the great and such like, who tell many an unlawfull leasing of the Ladyes of the Lake, that is, the Nymphes. For the word Nymph in Greeke signifieth Well water, or otherwise a Spouse or Bryde. (Spenser 1989: 82)

These “fine fablers and lowd lyers” are not named here, or in the letter to Sir Walter Raleigh appended to the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* (1590), when Spenser, having served under another Arthur in Ireland – Lord Grey de Wilton – chooses to join their ranks. He explains his choice of hero thus:

I chose the historye of king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former workes, and also furthest from the daunger of envy, and suspition of present time [...] I labour to pourtraict in Arthure, before he was king, the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private morall vertues, as Aristotle hath devised, the which is the purpose of these first twelve bookes: which if I finde to be well accepted, I may be perhaps encouraged, to frame the other part of polliticke vertues in his person, after that hee came to be king. (Spenser 2007: 715)

A. C. Hamilton, noting Spenser's earlier sceptical reference to Arthur, concludes that: "Since the poem's fiction treats Arthur before he was king, for which there was little historical evidence, S. is free from 'enuy, and suspition of present time'" (Spenser 2007: 715 n.11). Setting aside the question of historical evidence for Arthur – young or old – one could argue the opposite, that Prince Arthur was more of an affront to a sitting issueless female monarch than "King Arthur the great." Spenser's disclaimer appears an exercise in obfuscation.

In *Philadelphus, or a defence of Brutes, and the Brutans history* (1593), Richard Harvey, younger brother of Spenser's mentor Gabriel, discussed the British kings' qualities under several headings. He found fault with Arthur in a way that anticipates Milton's later disaffection with home-grown heroes venturing far afield. Under "Government", he writes:

*Arthur* disposed all things in order, sailed into *Gallia*, left his nephew *Mordred* for king, and wrought great myracles abroad. It had been more wisdom, to



have wrought them at home, if they were good, to do his owne people good: or if they were deceites, to have practised them privily, that his name might not be blotted and diminished. (Harvey 1593: 86)

Under “*Magnificence and Magnanimitie*”, Harvey says Arthur “built the castle of Windsor, and founded the order of knightes of the round table”, adding a line of interest to Spenserians, namely that “*Artgall* the first Eare [sic] of Warwicke, one of *Arthurs* knights chose a Beare for his beast, because Arth in that language signified a Beare, in remembrance of his name among all his posteritie” (88-9). Under “Ambition”, Harvey asserts that “*Arthur* gaue two Shyres to *Cerdrick* Duke of the Westsaxons, to the end hee might be quiet: those two shyres could do *Brutans* more good then *Arthurs* peregrination” (91). Harvey then mentions “an *Arthur* in paperworke” that may be an unnoticed reference to *The Faerie Queene*:

there is an *Arthur* in paperworke against their inuasions, which may in all right and equitie give them twelve disgraces at the least, and perhaps twelve times twelve: let the triall prove all, or let that labour be lost, if they can recouer there 12 losses of this newe *Arthur*. (Harvey 1593: 90-91)

Arthur’s twelve battles against the Saxons appear to sit alongside another significant twelve – perhaps the twelve books of *The Faerie Queene*? As Millican says, “it is not supererogatory in relation to *The Faerie Queene* to stress again the contemporaneous existence of London’s Prince Arthur and his knights of the Round Table<sup>3</sup> [...] when much is made of Spenser’s living behind his age in the playground of mediaeval romance” (Millican 1930: 173). There was no need to look further than Mile End

Green to find Prince Arthur's Knights shooting at "the butte, or the pricke"

(Mulcaster 1581: 101).

### **Shakespeare's Arthur**

References to Arthur in Shakespeare are elusive and fleeting. Among the earliest is Justice Shallow's recollection of playing a Knight of the Round Table: "I was then Sir Dagonet in Arthur's show" (2*Henry4* 3.2. 257), which chimes with Mulcaster's recording of an Elizabethan London Round Table. Nonetheless, it has long been recognized that both Malory and Shakespeare held up a mirror to their times:

"Shakespeare in his *Henry IV* and *V* gives us Elizabethan England in a garb of Lancastrian names and events; Malory gives us the first half of the fifteenth century masked in the characters and incidents of the traditional Round Table tales" (Aurner 1933: 389). For Aurner, Malory's Arthur is as allegorical as Spenser's and addresses the period of Shakespeare's histories.

*Henry V* is, like *Morte Darthur*, populated by regional characters, but Shakespeare counters Malory's devolution with nationalism. While *Henry IV* was fraught with regional dissent in the rebellions of Douglas and Glendower, *Henry V* sees the constituent British nations united against the common enemy, France. This elision of regional identity has an Arthurian precedent, since Arthur, "himself of Cornish descent [...] finally secures his right to the throne only after long opposition and the passing of several tests – of blood, of individual prowess, of the ability to command – all acts which seem designed to rewrite or overwrite his Cornish heritage, identifying and reinscribing him not as the son of the Duchess of Cornwall, but instead as the heir of the High King Uther" (Armstrong 2006: 201).

Arthur's Cornish roots are echoed in Henry V's Welshness, as Fluellen makes an elaborate and punning comparison between Welsh Henry, "porn at Monmouth", and "Alexander the Pig", born at Macedon (4.7.10). Gower's correction, "Alexander the Great", calls forth the response: "Why I pray you, is not 'pig' great? The pig or the great or the mighty or the huge or the magnanimous are all one reckonings, save the phrase is a little variations" (4.7.13-15).<sup>4</sup> Fluellen's conclusion, that "there is good men porn at Monmouth", points back to another great man, King Arthur, mythologized by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

While Arthur is only invoked obliquely here, he has particular resonance for Agincourt, since Excalibur was allegedly in Henry V's luggage at the battle (Rouse and Rushton 2009: 232). Fluellen decries the actions of retreating French forces – "Kill the poys and the luggage! 'Tis expressly against the law of arms" (4.7.1-2) – and Gower adds "they have burned and carried away all that was in the king's tent, *wherefore* the king, most worthily hath caused every soldier to cut his prisoner's throat" (4.7.5-7, emphasis added). While David Quint has suggested that Henry's captains believe the French prisoners are killed "in reprisal for the massacre of the English boys and baggage carriers" (Quint 1982: 51), Gower's placement of "wherefore" implies the French prisoners are actually killed in reprisal for the theft of the king's luggage, Excalibur amongst it. Nonetheless, Quint is right to note that the prisoners are killed as "a tactical ploy in the face of a new French offensive" (Quint 1982: 51), since the line preceding Henry's order to kill the prisoners – "The French have reinforced their scattered men" (4.6.36) – makes no mention of boys or luggage.

Henry treats his enemies ruthlessly and his friends callously. Fluellen mentions Alexander rather than Arthur, but the point of his comparison of Henry with "Alexander the Pig" is to bring in Falstaff, since just as "Alexander killed his friend

Cleitus, being in his ales and his cups, so also Harry Monmouth [...] turned away the fat knight with the great belly-doublet” (4.7.29-32). Falstaff is a character with previous Arthurian associations, as Jonathan Bate observes:

In Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Prince Arthur rode through Gloriana’s land, fighting for truth and justice. Is it Henry V who reanimates Arthur, England’s patron king? No: it is Falstaff who gives us a running Arthurian commentary. His is an earthy England, not a chivalric one like Spenser’s: “‘When Arthur first in court” – Empty the Jordan. – “And was a worthy king”’. But it offers nonetheless the play’s deepest myth of England, a myth that becomes comically religious in the inspired malapropism of Nell Quickly, or Nell Pistol as she has by then become: “Nay, sure, he’s not in hell: he’s in Arthur’s bosom, if ever man went to Arthur’s bosom”. (Bate 1993: 12)

Nell Quickly’s lines have engendered some discussion. In conflating Arthur and Abraham – as Fluellen may be seen to substitute Alexander for Arthur, or Milton later Adam for Arthur – she keeps the British myth alive around Falstaff.

*King John* offers a more sustained meditation on an Arthurian claim, that of Prince Arthur, Duke of Brittany, son of Geoffrey, Duke of Brittany, fourth son of Henry II: “The choice of name exploited Arthur’s literary fame as well as Breton national sentiment. In the words of William of Newburgh, ‘Having long awaited a legendary Arthur, they now raise a real one’” (Padel 2004). This Arthur was a contested figure, exploited by his uncle Richard as a lever against his brother John (Jones 2004). Another Arthur, Henry VII’s eldest son, born in 1486, the year after Malory’s *Morte Darthur* was published, was a certain future king until his death at

fifteen on 2 April 1502, when his younger brother Henry became heir to the throne and in October was duly named Duke of Cornwall – a title closely associated with Arthurian legend – and in February 1503 Prince of Wales and Earl of Chester. In Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* the Duke of Suffolk declares that

Katherine no more

Shall be called "Queen", but "Princess Dowager"

And "widow to Prince Arthur". (3.2.69-71)

This Arthur was also warden of all the marches towards Scotland: "The heraldry displayed at his funeral included not only his own arms, and those of Wales, Cornwall, and Chester, but also the arms of Cadwalader and Brutus" (Horrox 2004). These two Prince Arthurs, named in the wake of Geoffrey of Monmouth and Malory's Arthurian revivals, had short lives, but the legend lived on.

### **Milton's Arthur**

Malory's *Morte Darthur* was republished by William Stansby in 1634, with a new preface written by Jacob Bloome which urged its readers "let us not be more cruell then death, to smother by murder [Arthur's] name, or let us not be worse then the grave in burying his fame." In 1638 Milton answered Bloome's call with a declaration that "If ever I shall summon back our native kings into our songs, and Arthur waging his wars beneath the earth, or if ever I shall proclaim the magnanimous heroes of the table which their mutual fidelity made invincible, and (if only the spirit be with me) shall shatter the Saxon phalanxes under the British Mars!" (Milton, *Epistle to Manso*, cited in Landon 1965: 60). In the *Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642), Milton admits to

having had a fondness in his youth for “lofty Fables and Romances, which recount in solemn canto’s the deeds of Knighthood founded by our victorious Kings” (Milton 1953-82 I: 891), but his ardency for Arthur diminished during the 1640s. Merrit Hughes speculates that Milton’s “reading of British history had made him feel that the true Arthur fell far short of his imaginary namesake in *The Faerie Queene*” (Hughes 1938: 263-4). Nonetheless, Milton did not abandon Arthur.

In *The Reason of Church Government* (1642) he pondered “what K[ing] or Knight before the conquest might be chosen in whom to lay the pattern of a Christian *Heroe*” (Milton 1953-82 I: 813-14), and this has been cited as evidence of a continuing commitment to the epic form (Gilbert 1919: 175). While “the pattern of a Christian hero” turned out to be Christ rather than Arthur – or “Adam rather than Arthur” in *Paradise Lost* (Williamson 1962: 18) – Milton’s politically charged later works marshalled the spirit of the romances he read. He found in Spenser’s Talus, whom he invokes in *Eikonoklastes* (Milton 1953-82 III: 390), and in the figure of Samson in his last great work (1671), republican Robocops who would shatter monarchical phalanxes. He certainly saw the value to royalists of the Arthurian legends, as when comparing Satan’s crew with stories

in Fable or *Romance* of *Uthers* Son

Begirt with *British* and *Armoric* Knights. (*PL* I. 580-1)

Here and in *Paradise Regained* romance is generally “on the side of the devil”, as Milton draws on Malory “to color the Satanic temptation”, just as he has Samson “granted ‘heroic martyrdom’ rather than a romantic trial by combat” (Williamson 1962: 20-21). But Milton did not only use Malory for diabolical ends, as “the

conquest of Satan in personal encounter and renunciation of the world sum up the ideal which patterns the knights of Malory's account of the quest of the Grail. The same formula applies to the hero of *Paradise Regained*" (Hughes 1938: 257). Yet Malory remains an absence in Milton studies – and studies of Shakespeare and Spenser too.

While some critics see in Milton's later poetry traces of the original intention to memorialize Arthur, others see such an intention only in the faded splendour – at best – of his prose British history: "It may be objected that in writing the *History of Britain* Milton did, after all, fulfil his youthful hope. Yet we observe that he originally promised to write a poem of 'the Trojans cruising our southern headlands'; and no one who has read the *History* would ever call it a poem, or, from the carping spirit in which much of it is written, material for a poem. If the *History of Britain* represents the highest reach of Milton's temperament in the realm of secular history, it is fortunate for English literature that in his poetry he used a more congenial tradition" (Jones 1927: 909, n. 25). This is harsh, as Milton's *History* is better than its poor standing with critics suggests.

Throughout his *History of Britain* Milton rails against his sources as monkish or monarchic and thus untrustworthy, and this despite the title page boasting that it is "collected out of the antientest and best authours thereof". For Milton, antiquarianism is mere king's evidence and fables are no more to be trusted than cathedral registers (Baker 2009).<sup>5</sup> His treatment of Arthur is typical. First he says: "In his daeis, saith *Nennius*, the *Saxons* prevail'd not much: against whom *Arthur*, as beeing then Chief General for the *British* Kings, made great War; but more renown'd in Songs and Romances, then in true stories" (Milton 1953-82 V: 156). Milton presses this idea of Arthur as an invention:

But who *Arthur* was, and whether ever any such reign'd in *Britain*, hath bin doubted heretofore, and may again with good reason. For the Monk of *Malmsbury*, and others whose credit hath sway'd most with the learned sort, we may well perceive to have known no more of this *Arthur* 500 years past, nor of his doeings, then we now living; And what they had to say, transcrib'd out of *Nennius*, a very trivial writer yet extant, which hath already bin related. Or out of a *British* Book, the same which he of *Monmouth* set forth, utterly unknown to the World, till more then 600 years after the dayes of *Arthur*, of whom (as *Sigebert* in his Chronicle confesses) all other Histories were silent, both Foren and Domestic, except only that fabulous Book. Others of later time have sought to assert him by old legends and Cathedrall regests. But he who can accept of Legends for good story, may quickly swell a volume with trash, and had need be furnish'd with two only necessities, leasure, and belief, whether it be the writer, or he that shall read. (Milton 1953-82 V: 164-166)

For Milton, viewed as a poet against empire, Arthur presents a problematic figure as both patriotic battler against occupying forces and self-aggrandizing adventurer (Armitage 1995). Others are too quick in alluding to "Milton's outright dismissal of the whole tradition as mere legend" (Armistead 1988: 55, n. 10). Milton is ambivalent. His real issue is with Arthur's imperial ambitions when he should have been fighting tyranny at home, precisely the same objection raised by Richard Harvey. Arthur's status as a Celtic king – or a British king who drew on Celtic followers – is also a source of irritation, making Milton lash out at Scottish humanist



George Buchanan, whom he elsewhere praises. Milton, like most English writers, downplayed the Celtic composition of the British state, ancient and (early) modern:

Notwithstanding all these unlikelyhoods of *Artur's* Reign and great achievements, in a narration crept in I know not how among the Laws of *Edward the Confessor*, *Artur* the famous King of *Britans*, is said not only to have expell'd hence the *Saracens*, who were not then known in *Europe*, but to have conquer'd *Freesland*, and all the North East Iles as far as *Russia*, to have made *Lapland* the Eastern bound of his Empire, and *Norway* the Chamber of *Britain*. When should this be done? from the *Saxons*, till after twelve Battells, he had no rest at home; after those, the *Britans* contented with the quiet they had from thir Saxon Enemies, were so far from seeking Conquests abroad, that, by report of *Gildas* above cited, they fell to civil Wars at home. (Milton 1953-82 V: 170)

Milton further suggests that if Arthur did exist and his actions were as described then he was not a good patriot:

Surely *Artur* much better had made War in old *Saxony*, to repress thir flowing hither, then to have won Kingdoms as far as *Russia*, scarce able heer to defend his own. *Buchanan* our Neighbour Historian reprehends him of Monmouth and others for fabling in the deeds of Arms, yet what he writes thereof himself, as of better credit, shews not whence he had but from those Fables; which he seems content to believe in part, on condition that the Scots and Picts may be thought to have assisted *Arthur* in all his Wars, and atchievements; whereof

appears as little grownd by any credible story, as of that which he most counts Fabulous. But not funder to contest about such uncertainties. (Milton 1953-82 V: 170-171)

It is not mere Scotophobia that informs Milton's criticism of "our Neighbour Historian". Buchanan is a figure Milton admires, but the non-English aspects of British mythology and in particular features that do not serve Milton's republican agenda are to be written out of the story.

In the posthumously published *Digression or Character*, considered an outtake from the third book of the *History of Britain*, Milton writes: "For the Sun which we want, ripens Wits as well as Fruits; and as Wine and Oyl are Imported to us from abroad: so must ripe Understanding, and many civil Vertues, be imported into our minds from Forreign Writings, and examples of best Ages, we shall else miscarry still, and come short in the attempts of any great Enterprise" (Milton 1953-82 V: 450). Milton certainly pulls no punches in showing pages of woe from British history, but the purpose of his jeremiad is ultimately to advocate importing foreign writings to bolster British cultural and political deficits, and in that respect, and some others, he is closer to Malory, that importer of French prose romances, than existing criticism allows. The *History* is also permeated by the topicality which invariably marked accounts of Arthur. Arthur was always allegorical, whether in Thomas Hughes' *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (1587) or Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590), despite the latter's protestations to the contrary. Geoffrey too was writing with an eye to the present (Dalton 2005), the *Historia* "written to serve Anglo-Norman interests" (MacColl 2006: 251). Geoffrey thus comes closer to later detractors like Milton than they would wish to acknowledge: "When Geoffrey invited us to look ahead to the end

of his history, his emphasis was on the downfall of the Britons and the moral failings that brought it about” (MacColl 2006: 256). Despite his barbs against Geoffrey, this is exactly Milton’s ending in his *History of Britain*. John Pocock’s plea for a new subject called British history is also a reminder of the world that was lost when British and European perspectives like Malory’s succumbed to a narrow Englishness (Pocock 1975).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We must remember that the architects of Britishness, and of “a pan-Britannic polity” were Welsh and Scottish – writers like Geoffrey of Monmouth and John Mair (MacColl 2006: 251).

<sup>2</sup> In 1568, John Caius, Master of Gonville and Caius College published an anonymous account of his university’s Arthurian credentials as *De Antiquitate Cantabrigiensis Academicæ libri duo*, which drew on a century of such assertions, with Henry Byneman, the printer behind Spenser’s translations of poems by Petrarch and Du Bellay in *A Theatre for Worldlings* (1569) (Millican 1930: 171-2).

<sup>3</sup> Spenser’s old headmaster, Richard Mulcaster, praised the London Round Table, “a Round Table of English archers” established under Henry VIII and still active in Spenser’s day (Millican 1930: 167-8, citing Mulcaster 1581: 101-2).

<sup>4</sup> Aurner notes that “Of course Malory, like Fluellen in his analogy between Henry and ‘Alexander the Pig,’ spoke but in figures and comparisons; yet even thus camouflaged, there must have been a veritable treasure-house of memories and hearsays based on experiences in the French wars that came to life again in his translation” (Aurner 1933: 373).

<sup>5</sup> Milton’s implication that the readers of loud liars like Geoffrey of Monmouth are not exactly discerning is supported by Bloome’s advising the audience of the 1634 *Morte Darthur* “to reade, but not to judge,” because “The Asse is no competent Judge betwixt the Owle and the Nightingale for the sweetnes of their voices”.

<sup>6</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien’s 200-page poem ‘The Fall of Arthur’ looks set to revive interest in the British/Celtic King just as Scottish independence and questions of national and regional autonomy are back on the agenda: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/oct/09/jrr-tolkien-new-poem-king-arthur>